Improvement in functioning of passport offices

381. SHRI SANJAY RAUT: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are considering to improve functioning of the passport offices by making it prompt and accessible services in the country;

(b) if so, the details thereof; and

(c) if not, the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) and (b) It is the constant endeavour of Government of India to improve the functioning of passport offices to render prompt and efficient services to the applicants. Several steps have been taken to achieve this objective including through special pendency clearance drives in various passport offices. As a result, the time taken to issue passports has been brought down significantly. Fresh guidelines have been issued to all passport offices to carry out Process Re-Engineering to simplify the procedures for issuance of passports. With a view to bring the passport services closer to the applicants, the passport applications are also being accepted at approximately 450 District Passport Cells and more than 200 Speed Post Centres across the country.

(c) Not applicable.

Denial at UK visa to single youths

382. SHRI K. RAMA MOHANA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that according to an independent watchdog monitoring the work of UK Visas, the Government of UK is following an uncalled for Policy of debarring young, single boys and girls from entering UK on the pretext that they would get married and settle there (UK);

(b) whether it is also a fact that the refusal rate for applications has gone up from 6.5 per cent four years ago to 15 per cent in 2003; and

(c) if so, Government reaction in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI RAO INDERJIT SINGH): (a) No. According to the Independent Monitor report published in February 2005 there is no evidence that single men or women were especially targeted for refusal of UK visa.

(b) The report has confirmed that the overall rate of UK visa refusals has gone up from 6.5% in 2000 to 15.4% in 2003-04 for all types of applications.

(c) Government of India has been taking up with the UK Government from time to time visa issues affecting Indian nationals.

Cancellation of TEAM-9 Summit

383. SHRI YASHWANT SINHA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether a summit meeting of TEAM-9 in West Africa was scheduled to be held in Senegal in May this year;

(b) whether this meeting was cancelled suddenly; and

(c) if so, the reasons for this cancellation?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI RAO INDERJIT SINGH): (a) No, Sir. It was proposed to have only a Ministerial meeting of TEAM-9 countries in Senegal in May 2005.

(b) and (c) The meeting could not be held as convenient dates for the assembly of all Ministers in Senegal in May 2005 could not be organised. The meeting was subsequently held on 3rd July, 2005 in Sirte, Libya.

New visa procedure for students visiting Australia

384. SHRI B.J. PANDA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the Australian High Commission in Delhi has evolved a new visa procedure for students wishing to study in Australia;